Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Testimony

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH

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Madam Chair:

Over one-half century ago, Aldo Leopold, the father of wildlife conservation in North America, eloquently testified to the imperative of maintaining healthy, diverse wildlife populations when he stated:

"To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering."

With regard to forest wildlife, Leopold understood that each cog and wheel will fit only in a specific place - a specific habitat. **The full array of forest wildlife on our National Forests can be maintained and enhanced only through the thoughtful implementation of the full range of habitat management prescriptions**.

Due to past land use practices, much of the eastern United States today supports forests that are approximately 60-80 years old and can be termed "middle-aged". Exceptions include the northern portions of Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire and Minnesota, where substantial young forest has recently been established as a result of commercial harvest activity. Very old forest exists only in small, scattered tracts.

Historically, this landscape supported a mosaic of various forest types of various ages as a result of natural disturbance patterns. The primary agents of disturbance were wind and fire of both "natural" and aboriginal origin. Although wind still plays a role in shaping our forests, fires today affect only 10% of the acreage they affected only a century ago and likely far less than prior to the first European contact with the New World. This reduction in forest regeneration and the establishment of specific wildlife habitats is partially offset today by the implementation of forest management practices designed to harvest wood-fiber products.

Forest management practices alter the physical structure and species composition of the overstory and understory vegetation that comprise forest stands and, therefore, the suitability of these forests as habitat for various wildlife species. Practices that remove only a few trees from a given forest stand will provide suitable habitat for species such as the hooded warbler and the northern parula warbler that prefer mature forest stands with small "gaps" in the forest canopy. These small gaps are established through the death or

removal of individual trees or small groups of trees. Practices that remove all or most of the mature overstory trees in a single operation partially mimic intense fires, allowing full sunlight to penetrate to the forest floor and "set back" the forest to one comprised primarily of young trees and shrubs growing very closely together. These dense, young forest habitats are essential to wildlife such as the ruffed grouse, golden-winged warbler and field sparrow.

National Forests account for only 6% of the forestland in the eastern United States, yet these publicly owned forests are major components of the landscape in various regions. Throughout the central and southern Appalachian Mountains, National Forests account for a substantial portion of the wildlife habitat at higher elevations. In addition, National Forests are extensive throughout the northern Great Lakes states.

Wildlife habitat conditions on National Forests in the eastern United States mirror those exhibited across the landscape as a whole. Very old forest habitats are rare, yet will increase in abundance as a result of current management direction and administrative constraints on habitat management activities on substantial portions of these National Forests. Very young forest habitats and associated wildlife species are declining as a result of significant reductions in acreage regenerated using even-age habitat management practices.

Wildlife management on National Forests must sustain the full array of wildlife habitats, through both active and passive forest management. This type of balanced approach will help to ensure the long-term viability of populations of all native wildlife. In addition, only by providing a diversity of wildlife habitats and, therefore, a diversity of wildlife, can National Forests meet the diversity of wildlife-related public interests.

Nonindustrial private forest landowners control the vast majority (70%) of our eastern forests. Wildlife populations in some locales depend entirely upon the availability of suitable habitats on these private lands.

The average size of privately owned forest tracts is declining as owners subdivide and sell large parcels to maximize economic return. The owners of small tracts are less likely to implement specific wildlife habitat management treatments than are the owners of large tracts. Survey data show that forest management practices commonly used on private lands do not remove sufficient overstory trees to allow for the development of dense, young forest habitats. National Forests and other public forestlands are important elements of the habitat base for wildlife dependent upon young forest habitats.

Large blocks of forestland dedicated to a single management strategy are difficult to establish on private tracts due to their relatively small size, fragmented ownership patterns and diverse landowner objectives. National Forests and other public forestlands are appropriate units to address wildlife habitat issues that can best be addressed at large spatial scales.

The variety of wildlife endemic to our nation's National Forests is a living legacy entrusted to our care for the benefit of future generations. Only through a balanced approach to forest stewardship, an approach that recognizes the ecological and social values and the varied habitat requirements of forest wildlife, can the needs of our forest wildlife resources and the needs of our children be adequately addressed.

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